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ABSTRACT

The use of outcomes research as a marketing tool for postsecondary educational institutions is discussed. Few such institutions integrate outcomes information into the institutional marketing program. In most cases this type of information is used to document actual outcomes, but rarely is it used as an indicator of needed change or success of the institution's marketing program. A tailored approach to outcomes research has been instituted at Metropolitan State College in Colorado as part of their marketing program. Basically, the approach has utilized a longitudinal cohort study of students to provide outcomes information. The research program also includes studies of various segments of the prospective student market and student information needs and a study of the college's impact on the community. A committee was formed to link outcome information to marketing and to stimulate the development of a comprehensive marketing program. The committee has continued to plan and conduct studies and to interpret and disseminate information related to outcomes information. The program has endeavored to make outcomes information more accessible to those involved in the various phases of institutional marketing, partly through improved dissemination of information and partly through the development of an outcomes data base that is linked to the college's data base system. (SW)

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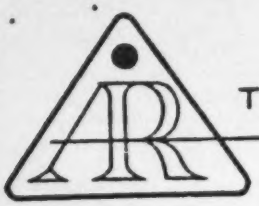

THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Nineteenth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Town and Country Inn in San Diego, California, May 13-17, 1979. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of Forum papers.

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Outcomes Research: Its Function as a Marketing Tool

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Outcomes Research: Its Function as a Marketing Tool

College and universities like other non-profit and profit oriented organizations are finding that they can strengthen and secure their positions by using the marketing concept. Discussion of marketing and marketing techniques applied to higher education has taken on a new tempo in recent years as a result of keen competition for students and resources. Based on projections of the future trends in the traditional college age population it would appear that marketing in the broadest sense, will become even more important to the higher education community (Dresch, 1977).

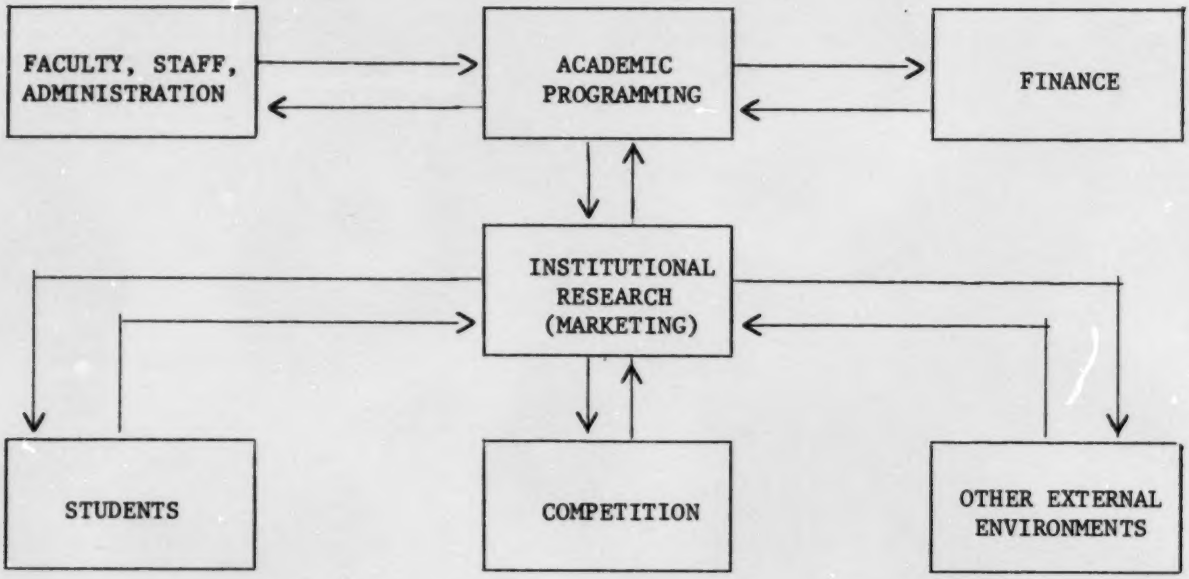
The marketing concept has been reviewed in a general manner in the higher education literature in the past decade. Articles discussing marketing have not been specific in their description of how the concept may be intergrated into the total college and university structure. Yet many of the activities that higher education institutions currently engage in can be integrated into a comprehensive marketing approach (eg. institutional research, information systems, communications office, resource allocation process, admissions process, etc).

Marketing is not a short-term activity but rather a comprehensive approach to matching people's needs with products to satisfy those needs. Successful marketing of a college or university, as with any product, requires a "constant" review and evaluation of past, present and future status of the market and the services rendered.

Few higher education institutions have truely incorporated marketing into their daily operations as a comprehensive force (Middleton, 1979). To accomplish this a marketing information system must be established to provide the information necessary for an institution to attune itself to its market environment. Market research allows the college to "determine the needs, wants and values of a target market and to adapt the organization to delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than its competitors" (Kotler,, 1976), This process also allows the organization to measure quantitatively and qualitatively the degree to which it is delivering the "desired satisfactions" (Kotler, 1976).

The basic flow of information through the marketing information system is depicted in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: INFORMATION FLOW THROUGH MARKETING INFORMATION SYSTEM



As depicted, the marketing information system is acting as the link between the internal organization and the external environments (especially the market place), where the effects of the college or university and those of its competitors are being exerted. The marketing information system acts in the following sequence: 1) planning; that is decided on the objectives, policies, and strategies and then plan the marketing programs to be followed; 2) operations allows the marketing programs to be put into action; 3) the marketing information system connects the external environment with the institution, feeding in data on markets, competitors, and other external factors; 4) controlling monitors the operations and then results; if feedback indicates that the system's results are not following the planned program, it either adapts the operations to changing conditions or modifies the objectives to reflect the environmental changes.

The office of institutional research (or its counterpart) should serve as the hub of the marketing information system monitoring the institutional pulse and that of the community. Presently many research offices at colleges have some focus on the investigation of the outcomes of the educational process. Lenning, et al (1976) define educational outcomes as the "result or consequences of an educational institution and its programs." In practice institutions are studying their effects on various audiences (students, faculty and staff, the local community, the region) and at various levels (knowledge, economic, service, etc.).

This information is usually gathered and studied intently but does not enter the flow of information in the institutions marketing process. Yet this same information is a vital link in the institutions comprehensive marketing approach.

Market testing, product research, product development, analysis of consumer behavior and so on are the concomitant terms for outcomes research which today we know as studies of community impact, student needs assessment, attrition/retention, academic assessment, and so forth.

Outcome information is not easily obtained. Studying the effects of higher education is not as direct or straight forward as the study of consumer or industrial products and services. But techniques, strategies and instruments are now readily available to aid in outcomes measurement. (see Armijo, Cooper and Micek, 1978, Pace, 1975 , Micek et al 1975), etc. Conducting market research can be costly (as pointed out by Thompson, 1979). But outcomes research which has multiple utility can be cost effectively applied to institutional marketing.

An example of an institutional outcomes project designed for its market research utility is at Metropolitan State College in Denver. MSC is a commuter campus having a fluid student population of approximately 13,000 students. The majority of students attend part-time, average more than 28 years of age, and attend college on a cycle that matches their personal needs and goals. In an effort to further understand the MSC student, their needs, and the institution's community impact, a study of students was devised. The project encompassed a series of short-term investigations, a longitudinal study of students, and the development of an outcomes information (consumer information) data base.

Short-term projects provided base line data for studies of recent alumni, continuing students, non-returning students, and entering students. These preliminary surveys also provided for instrument design and testing and were carried out over a years time.

The study of students on a longitudinal basis has been undertaken by few institutions although recommendations to conduct this type of

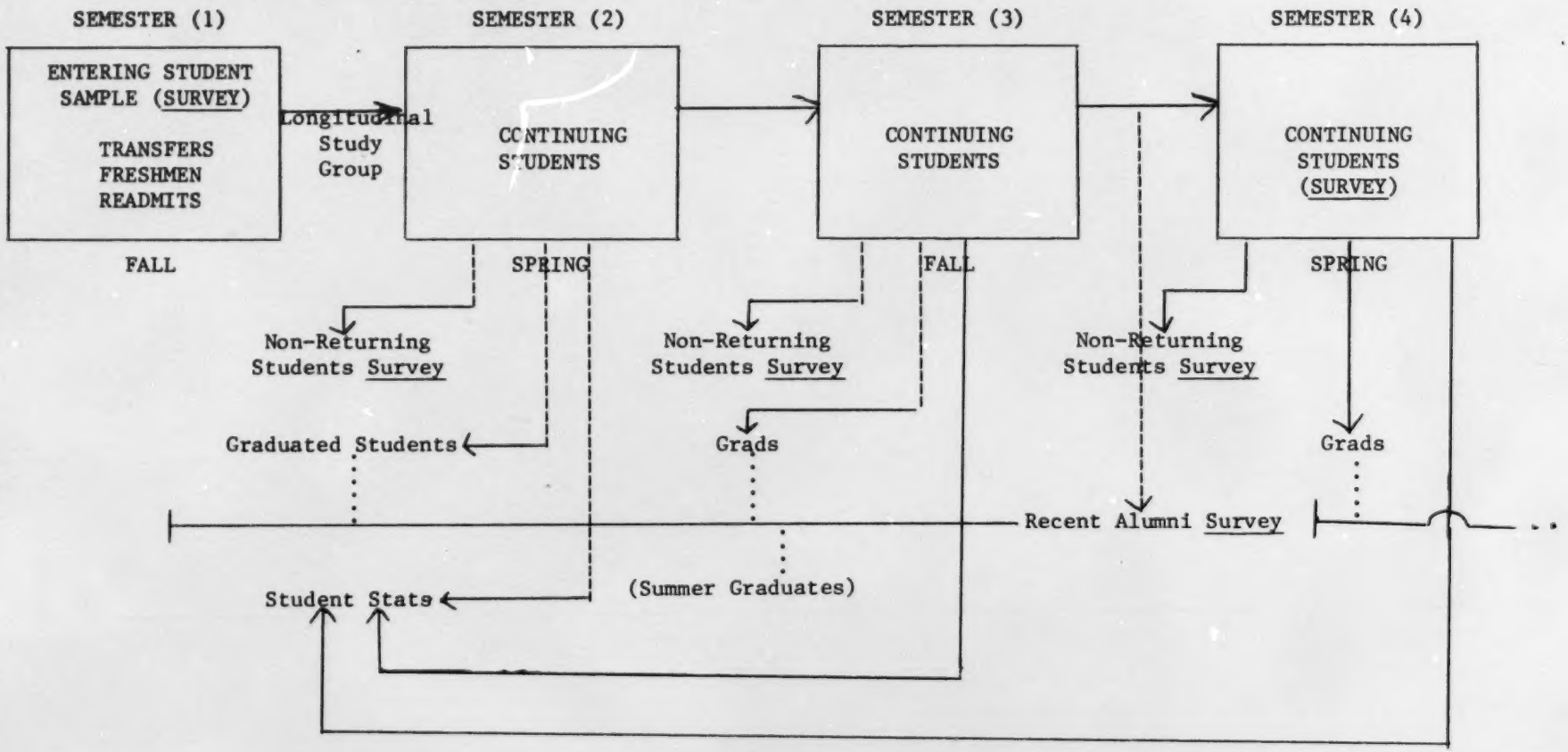
study have long been made. This is especially true in relation to providing meaningful data on student attrition (Tinto, 1975). With this in mind a data collection system was devised to capture survey data at key times in the student's progress at the institution and match it with data normally held in the college's information system. Figure 2 depicts the flow of students and the survey administration times for the longitudinal sample. (see page 5.)

Two other components in the project were assessments of prospective students and a study of the college's impact on the community. These studies have yet to be initiated but will provide critical information to the comprehensive marketing process.

As noted in Figure 2 the assessments of students in alumni, entering, current (continuing), and non-returning groups were developed and implemented over the past 2 years. Part of the overall plan to assess student movement at Metropolitan State College, (hence, to provide the necessary data to build a marketing system)---these survey instruments allowed us not only to collect the important demographic information, but also included questions relating to the repondent's opinions and attitudes concerning various academic and non-academic facets of Metropolitan State College. This type of information is necessary if the college is to respond to areas of need as expressed by our market, that is the student.

At this time several changes have been made as a result of the outcomes project. In one area we were able to determine that even though an overwhelming majority of students used mail-in registration, it was found that they weren't sure of what classes to enroll in or what particular areas of study would lead them to accomplish their post-secondary educational goals. Responding to our students' needs an advising system was initiated whereby all entering students who do not register by mail are given the opportunity to speak with either a faculty member or an administrator for course selection guidance and to answer any questions which the student may have concerning their status at Metropolitan State College. In addition these students continue the contact with their advisors during the semester to determine if any problems have arisen during this transition phase.

FIGURE 2: LONGITUDINAL COHORT STUDY AT METROPOLITAN STATE COLLEGE



Those students who are continuing on or are returning to MSC after stopping-out are also encouraged to meet with an advisor. It is hoped this will provide both academic advising and a direct contact point that many commuting students do not presently find.

Class scheduling problems were another category of concern which appeared in the responses of the different student groups studied. Since the large majority of MSC students hold down jobs of one kind or another, there is a valid concern that students could not get the appropriate classes at night and would elect to take fewer credit hours or perhaps not to attend MSC at all. This was especially true for courses required by a specific major which the student must complete to graduate. The class scheduling process now approached this problem, not from a distance but rather to the point of trying to accommodate the students by offering multiple sections of the required and most desired courses.

Students also expressed a strong desire to integrate their didactic skills with actual experiential learning. As a result of this finding the cooperative education department has made a concerned effort to go out to the Metropolitan Denver Business Community to seek positions for those students who would benefit most by integrating their classroom activity with on-the-job-training. Returns from alumni also indicated that cooperative education was beneficial to their securing a job after graduation.

Summary

The broad spectrum of outcomes is growing in importance as educational institutions pursue a fuller understanding of their inputs and impacts.

The information gathered through outcomes research has direct parallels in marketing product research and consumer satisfaction. Few postsecondary institutions integrate outcomes information into the institutional marketing program. In most cases this type of information is used to document actual outcomes but rarely is it used as an indicator of needed change or success of the institutions marketing program.

As a part of their marketing program, a tailored approach to outcomes research has been instituted at Metropolitan State College in Denver. Basically this approach has utilized a longitudinal cohort study of students to provide outcomes information.

Other facets of the research program include studies of various segments of the prospective student market, student information needs, and a study of MSC's impact on the community. A fundamental underpinning of this project has been to tie the institutions marketing components together as a marketing program.

To link outcome information to marketing and stimulate a comprehensive marketing program a committee from the representative areas involved in the marketing of Metropolitan State College was convened. This committee has continued to plan and conduct studies, interpret and disseminate information related to outcomes information. Another phase of this program has been to make outcomes information more accessible to those involved in the phases of institutional marketing. This is being achieved through broader dissemination of information (multiple channels of communication) as well as through a developing outcomes data base which is linked to the college's data base system.

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